

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT  
EASTERN DISTRICT OF WISCONSIN

LUIS A. CURET,

Plaintiff,

v.

CHRISTOPHER BLOOM and  
OFFICER TIM FILTER,

Defendants.

Case No. 20-CV-412-JPS

**ORDER**

On August 9, 2021, Plaintiff filed an amended complaint under 42 U.S.C. § 1983 alleging that Defendants violated his constitutional rights. (Docket #10). The Court screened the complaint and allowed Plaintiff to proceed on the following two claims:

**Claim One:** Unreasonable search, in violation of the Fourth Amendment, by Defendants Bloom and Filter on December 14, 2017; and

**Claim Two:** The use of excessive force against Plaintiff, in violation of the Fourth Amendment, by Defendant Bloom on December 14, 2017.

(Docket #12 at 6). The Court now turns to Plaintiff's motion to extend time and to amend his complaint, (Docket #19), and his motion to appoint counsel, (Docket #21).

**1. Motion to Extend and to Amend**

Plaintiff submitted a motion to extend the "time to file response to defendant motion and request for permission to amend complaint." (Docket #19). First, as to his request for an extension of time, it appears that Plaintiff has misunderstood Defendants' answer, (Docket #17), to be a

dispositive motion. Defendants have not filed any motions in this matter. Accordingly, the Court will deny Plaintiff's request. The Court does note, however, that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused delays in scheduling cases. In the coming weeks, the Court will issue a formal scheduling order in this matter.

Second, as to his request to amend his complaint for a second time, Plaintiff states that he wishes to amend only so that he may "number[] [the allegations] the right way." (Docket #31). The operative complaint in this matter, (Docket #10), is only three pages long. The Court was able to understand it without the allegations being numbered, and Defendants have already filed an answer to it (adding their own numbering for ease of reference, (see Docket #17-1)). The complaint is understandable as is, and the Court will not require that the parties spend their time and resources dealing with a third iteration of the complaint. The Court will deny Plaintiff's motion to amend.

## **2. Motion to Appoint Counsel**

As a civil litigant, Plaintiff has "neither a constitutional nor statutory right to a court-appointed attorney." *James v. Eli*, 889 F.3d 320, 326 (7th Cir. 2018). However, under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(1), a "court may request an attorney to represent any person unable to afford counsel." A court should seek counsel to represent a plaintiff if: (1) he has made reasonable attempts to secure counsel; and (2) "'the difficulty of the case—factually and legally—exceeds the particular plaintiff's capacity as a layperson to coherently present it.'" *Navejar v. Iyiola*, 718 F.3d 692, 696 (7th Cir. 2013) (quoting *Pruitt v. Mote*, 503 F.3d 647, 655 (7th Cir. 2007) (en banc)). Whether to appoint counsel in a particular case is left to a court's discretion. *James*, 889 F.3d at 326; *McCaa v. Hamilton*, 893 F.3d 1027, 1031 (7th Cir. 2018).

While framed in terms of a plaintiff's capacity to litigate, this discretion must also be informed by the realities of recruiting counsel in this District. When a court recruits a lawyer to represent a pro se party, the lawyer takes the case pro bono. Unlike a lawyer appointed to represent a criminal defendant during his prosecution, who is paid by the government for his work, an attorney who takes a prisoner's civil case pro bono has no promise of compensation.

It is difficult to convince local lawyers to take such cases. Unlike other districts in this Circuit, *see, e.g.*, L.R. 83.35 (N.D. Ill.), the Eastern District of Wisconsin does not employ an involuntary appointment system for lawyers admitted to practice in the District. Instead, the District relies on the willingness of lawyers to sign up for the Pro Bono Attorney Panel and, once there, accept appointments as needed. *See Pro Bono Program, available at: <http://www.wied.uscourts.gov/pro-bono-program>.*

The District is grateful to the lawyers who participate in the Pro Bono Program, but there are never enough volunteers, and those who do volunteer rarely take more than one or two cases a year. This is understandable, as many are already busy attending to fee-paying clients. Although the Pro Bono Program does provide for payment of certain litigation expenses, it does not directly compensate a lawyer for his or her time. Participants may seek attorney's fees when permitted by statute, such as in successful § 1983 cases, but they will otherwise go unpaid. The small pool of attorneys available to this District for pro bono appointments stands in stark contrast to that of the Court of Appeals, which regularly recruits counsel from across the nation to represent pro se plaintiffs on appeal. *See, e.g., James*, 889 F.3d at 323 (appointing counsel from Washington, D.C. to represent the pro se appellant); *McCaa*, 893 F.3d at 1029 (same).

Against the thin ranks of ready and willing counsel rises the overwhelming tide of pro se prisoner litigation in this District.<sup>1</sup> In 2010, approximately 300 civil actions were filed by prisoner litigants. More than half sought habeas corpus relief, while the remainder were § 1983 actions alleging violations of constitutional rights. Since then, the number of habeas corpus cases has remained largely steady at around 130 per year, while the volume of § 1983 lawsuits has skyrocketed. About 300 § 1983 actions were filed in 2014, and another 300 in 2015—each equal to the entirety of the District’s civil prisoner filings from just four years earlier. In 2016, § 1983 actions numbered 385, in 2017 it ballooned to 498, and in 2018 it grew to 549. All told, well over a third of the District’s new case filings are submitted by unrepresented inmates. On its best day, this District has the resources to realistically consider appointment of counsel in only a tiny fraction of these cases.

Finally, it must be remembered that, when a court determines that counsel recruitment is appropriate, it can take months to locate a willing lawyer. This delay works to the detriment of all parties and contravenes Congress’s instruction in Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 1 that district courts must endeavor to secure the “just, speedy, and inexpensive

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<sup>1</sup>Although non-prisoner pro se litigants may also be considered for the appointment of counsel under § 1915, the Court does not address that set of pro se litigants here for a few reasons. First, the volume of non-prisoner pro se litigation is minuscule compared to that brought by prisoners. Second, prisoners are much more likely to request the appointment of counsel. Paradoxically, prisoners are usually far better equipped to litigate than non-prisoners, as prisoners have access to electronic filing, institution law libraries, and fellow prisoners who offer services as “jailhouse lawyers.” Yet, learning a little of the legal system means that prisoners know they can request the appointment of pro bono counsel, which they do with regularity.

determination of every action.” Fed. R. Civ. P. 1. Thus, looming large over each request for counsel are a court’s ever-more-limited time and resources.

With these considerations in mind, the Court returns to the question presented: whether counsel can and should be recruited to represent Plaintiff at this stage in this case. First, a court asks whether the litigant has made “reasonable” efforts to obtain his own representation. *Pruitt*, 503 F.3d at 655; *Jackson v. County of McLean*, 953 F.2d 1070, 1073 (7th Cir. 1992). It is a question not often litigated; many district court judges either overlook arguably unreasonable efforts at obtaining counsel, or they impose eminently practical requirements such as the submission of evidence demonstrating that the prisoner has tried and failed to secure representation from several lawyers. *See, e.g., Kyle v. Feather*, No. 09-cv-90-bbc, 2009 WL 2474627, at \*1 (W.D. Wis. Aug. 11, 2009).

The first element of *Pruitt* is fairly easy to satisfy, but it is not toothless, and it is not a mere technical condition of submitting a certain number of rejection letters. If it was, then a Wisconsin prisoner litigating a § 1983 action could submit rejection letters from ten randomly selected criminal defense lawyers from Nevada and call his work complete. This cannot be. The purpose of the reasonable-efforts requirement is to ensure that if a court and private lawyers must expend scarce resources to provide counsel for a prisoner, he has at least made a good-faith effort to avoid those costs by getting a lawyer himself. To fulfill this duty, a pro se prisoner should reach out to lawyers whose areas of practice suggest that they might consider taking his case. If he learns that some of the lawyers he has contacted do not, he should reach out to others before he concludes that no one will help him.

Plaintiff has submitted evidence and makes statements regarding the handful of lawyers that he contacted to represent him in this matter. (Docket #22-1 at 3; #24). He includes copies of some of the rejection letters he received in response and states that he did not hear back from other lawyers. (Docket #22-1 at 3; #24). Plaintiff could have done more to secure counsel, but, even if he had, the Court's analysis does not end there.

Plaintiff's request must also succeed on the second *Pruitt* question: whether the difficulty of the case exceeds his capacity to coherently present it. This assessment must be made in light of the particular capabilities and circumstances presented by each pro se litigant. *James*, 889 F.3d at 326–27. The Court of Appeals explains:

The second step is itself grounded in a two-fold inquiry into both the difficulty of the plaintiff's claims and the plaintiff's competence to litigate those claims himself. The inquiries are necessarily intertwined; the difficulty of the case is considered against the plaintiff's litigation capabilities, and those capabilities are examined in light of the challenges specific to the case at hand. Ultimately, the question is not whether a lawyer would present the case more effectively than the pro se plaintiff; if that were the test, district judges would be required to request counsel for every indigent litigant. Rather, the question is whether the difficulty of the case—factually and legally—exceeds the particular plaintiff's capacity as a layperson to coherently present it to the judge or jury himself. Notably, this inquiry extends beyond the trial stage of the proceedings. The relevant concern is whether the plaintiff appears competent to litigate his own claims, given their degree of difficulty. This includes all of the tasks that normally attend litigation: evidence gathering, preparing and responding to motions and other court filings, and trial.

*Id.* (citations and quotations omitted). While a court need not address every concern raised in a motion for appointment of counsel, it must address

“those that bear directly” on the individual’s capacity to litigate his case. *McCaa*, 893 F.3d at 1032.

The balancing contemplated in the second *Pruitt* step must be done against the backdrop that district courts cannot be expected to appoint counsel in circumstances which are common to all or many prisoners. *See Bracey v. Grondin*, 712 F.3d 1012, 1017–18 (7th Cir. 2013); *Pruitt*, 503 F.3d at 656 (observing that the Seventh Circuit has “resisted laying down categorical rules regarding recruitment of counsel in particular types of cases”); *Harper v. Bolton*, 57 F. Supp. 3d 889, 893 (N.D. Ill. 2014). Doing so would place untenable burdens on court resources. It would also turn the discretion of § 1915(e)(2) on its head, making appointment of counsel the rule rather than the exception.

Several pronouncements from the Court of Appeals appear to be in tension with this principle. First, the Seventh Circuit notes that “complexity increases and competence decreases as a case proceeds to the advanced phases of litigation.” *James*, 889 F.3d at 327. It deems the “[a]dvanced phases” to include those from discovery onward. *Id.*; *McCaa*, 893 F.3d at 1032. But nearly every prisoner case proceeds to discovery, as the district court applies exceedingly lenient review during initial screening.

Second, the Seventh Circuit instructs that district courts should evaluate a prisoner’s competency irrespective of the involvement of a “jailhouse lawyer.” *McCaa*, 893 F.3d at 1033; *Walker v. Price*, No. 17-1345, 2018 WL 3967298, at \*5 (7th Cir. Aug. 20, 2018). How courts should do this is not clear. A court rarely knows whether a filing was prepared by the plaintiff or someone helping him. And if a court does know that the plaintiff is receiving help, how can it assess his ability to litigate without knowing which portions of the filings are his work, and which come from the

jailhouse lawyer? In *Walker*, the court determined that the inmate's work product decreased in quality after his jailhouse lawyer was transferred to another prison. 2018 WL 3967298, at \*6. Yet a savvy prisoner, looking to secure counsel for himself, could do this on purpose, crafting his filings to downplay his own litigation capabilities. A court would have no way to assess whether the inmate is sandbagging it.

Finally, the Court of Appeals indicates that claims involving the state of mind of the defendant, such as those involving deliberate indifference, are particularly complex. *James*, 889 F.3d at 327–28; *McCaa*, 893 F.3d at 1032. Yet a government official's culpable mental state is the foundation for most constitutional claims. Indeed, it is often the defining characteristic that sets § 1983 claims apart from their state-law tort analogues. Deliberate indifference is essential to nearly all claims of cruel and unusual punishment, excessive force, mistreatment of medical needs, and First Amendment and due process violations. See *Kingsley v. Henderson*, 135 S. Ct. 2466, 2473 (2015); *County of Sacramento v. Lewis*, 523 U.S. 833, 849 (1998); *Estelle v. Gamble*, 429 U.S. 97, 106 (1976); *Hambright v. Kemper*, 705 F. App'x 461, 462 (7th Cir. 2017); *Milton v. Slota*, 697 F. App'x 462, 464 (7th Cir. 2017) (“[N]egligently inflicted harm does not amount to a constitutional violation.”) (emphasis in original). Taken together, these claims comprise the vast majority of prisoner litigation in this District. If state-of-mind issues are generally beyond the ability of most pro se litigants to prove, then a court likely would need to appoint counsel in nearly every prisoner case. This is plainly impossible.

The guiding rule has always been that appointment of counsel is the exception rather than the rule in pro se prisoner litigation. Yet a confluence of all-too-common circumstances—discovery, jailhouse lawyers, and

claims concerning state of mind—militate in favor of the appointment of counsel. As the list of reasons to appoint counsel grows, the reasons not to do so shrink. This District’s resources have not kept pace.

Against this backdrop, the Court finds that Plaintiff has not presented sufficient evidence and argument showing that he cannot litigate or try this matter competently on his own. Plaintiff states that he “is only one person,” whereas Defendants have a team of “highly educated experienced attorneys.” (Docket #22 at 2). He explains that Defendants are likely to raise a host of “technicalities” (e.g., claim preclusion) to get Plaintiff’s case dismissed. (*Id.* at 2–3). He is also concerned about his ability to procure and work with witnesses. (*Id.* at 4–6).

It is true, as Plaintiff intuits, that a lawyer would be helpful in navigating the legal system; trained attorneys are better positioned to successfully raise defenses. But Plaintiff’s lack of legal training brings him in line with practically every other prisoner litigating in this Court. Further, the Court will assist Plaintiff in this regard (as it does with all prisoner litigants) by providing copies of the most pertinent federal and local procedural rules along with its scheduling order. Thus, ignorance of the law or court procedure is generally not a qualifying reason for appointment of counsel. Similarly, nearly all prisoner litigants face the challenge of being unable to fact-find and interview witnesses from prison. Further, throughout his motion, Plaintiff grapples with the various elements of his claims, demonstrating some understanding of the law and the elements he will eventually have to prove. (*Id.* at 1–11). The Court will deny Plaintiff’s motion to appoint counsel.

Accordingly,

**IT IS ORDERED** that Plaintiff's motion for an extension and to amend (Docket #19) be and the same is hereby **DENIED**; and

**IT IS FURTHER ORDERED** that Plaintiff's motion for appointment of counsel (Docket #21) be and the same is hereby **DENIED**.

Dated at Milwaukee, Wisconsin, this 17th day of February, 2022.

BY THE COURT:



J. P. Stadtmueller  
U.S. District Judge